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Costa Rica Any Way You Want It



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

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THINK of Costa Rica as a Rorschach test for travelers. Outlined on a map, it has no recognizable shape. But enclosed in tropical lines of latitude, with appropriate squiggles for mountains, coasts and interior borders, it's an inkblot for projecting travel fantasies. Beach lovers trace the craggy coasts and see hammocks swinging in the sunset breeze. The eyes of the nature-minded glaze when they note all the national parks. And adrenaline fanatics fixate on the mountains and rivers.

Costa Rica Travel Guide

Costa Rica is tiny, smaller than West Virginia, but huge in versatility, with coasts on two oceans, coral-lined beaches and active volcanoes, luxury resorts and surf camps, roaring streams and rich biodiversity. Planning a trip for myself and my father last November, I set myself a challenge. How many Costa Ricas could we sample in just eight days? I settled on three: the rich primordial forest, the adventurer's playground and the beachfront paradise. After subtracting travel time within the country, we would have a day and a half to two and a half days at our chosen location for each one, time enough for a taste, at least, of the country's riches.

Eco-Tourism:

Monteverde

I stared into the dark jungle, hoping to see something staring back. The blackness was not complete; overhead the outlines of banana trees let in a little starlight, and, of course, for walking through the forest at night we all carried flashlights. Like most tourists, I had come to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve in hopes of seeing big mammals like jaguars, ocelots or tapirs. I didn't. Almost no one does. But 10 minutes with a guide on a three-hour walk our first night in the reserve proved that the plants and insects can be just as captivating — and as deadly.

The guide, who introduced himself only as Christian, combined the laid-back attitude of a surfer with the taxonomic command of an evolutionary biologist. He showed us an alligator tree, whose broad, conical spikes were developed to repel the elephant-size sloths that roamed the Americas as recently as 10,000 years ago. He grew animated as he called us over to look at a strangler fig, which begins life as an innocent epiphyte delivered into an unsuspecting tree's branches by a bird, then grows vines up to the sunlight and down to the ground, eventually enveloping the host tree and strangling it.

In a hole in the dead tree, behind the sinewy crawl of fig roots, Christian shined his light on an orange-kneed tarantula perched at the entrance, waiting for its prey. Why didn't it hunt out in the open, someone asked? Christian explained that tarantula wasps live in the area, waiting to paralyze a tarantula with their sting, lay eggs inside it and wait as the wasp larvae slowly consume the still-living spider from within. Let's see an ocelot try that.

Situated in the Tilarán Mountains northwest of San José, Costa Rica's capital, Monteverde is a Disneyland for eco-tourists. With its verdant cloud forest and 1,000 endemic plant species, Monteverde offers the pilgrimage to nature that many seek from the tropics. Since tourists are unlikely to spot all the wildlife they might wish to, private guides have always operated in the reserve, and in recent years, privately run zoo-like exhibitions have popped up: a bat jungle, a frog pond, a butterfly garden, a serpentarium. Add an organic cheese factory, a fair-trade coffee plantation and a half-dozen high-end hotels that vie to outdo one another with their recycling programs and renewable energy projects, and Monteverde has all senses of the word “green” covered.

Twenty-seven percent of Costa Rica's land area is devoted to national parks and reserves, one of the highest percentages for any country. Monteverde, which is the primary place marketed to eco-tourists, is between two reserves — Monteverde and Santa Elena — deep in the Costa Rican highlands. It is well developed, with hotels, several restaurants, shops and art galleries. It even has an asphalt road connecting the two reserves and villages between, which is curious since the four-hour drive through farms and orchards to get to the area from San José is rocky and rutted — a result, locals say, of an earlier desire to keep down the number of visitors (now, most would prefer that the government pave the road). It is an oasis of infrastructure amid the rural and the wild.

We stayed at the Hotel Belmar, off the main drag between the town and the Monteverde reserve. Most people make reservations for the various activities through the hotels because guides are recommended. For those with keen wilderness eyes or their own binoculars or both, it is possible to walk through the reserves unguided.

The next day, our only full day in the area, brought sunlight and a decidedly more benign face from nature. Inside the Monteverde reserve, weaving among clusters of people with their own guides and tripod-attached spotting scopes, our tour group passed huge, leafy elephant ear plants and miniature orchids no more than a millimeter or two across. Monkeys howled and birds twittered overhead, and we spotted a sloth sleeping out the day, matted gray fur tucked into a cradle of branches 20 feet up.

The real joy-bringers were the hummingbirds, sporadic companions within the reserve but constant ones just outside it, where sugar-water feeders were set up. The names by themselves were enough to force smiles: green-crowned brilliants, purple-throated mountain-gems, coppery-headed emeralds! The most dramatic were the violet sabrewings with their white tail feathers and iridescent bodies, purple like a royal robe. Around the feeders, the hummingbirds buzzed by our ears like a squadron of propeller planes. No wonder: with only nectar for food and heart rates of as high as around 1,200 beats a minute, these birds live in a nonstop sugar rush.

Looking for animals in a nature preserve is a bit like playing blackjack in a casino: you know the odds are against you, but at least it feels like skill when you win. Not quite sated with birds and bugs and plants, I decided to stack the deck and take a taxi to El Ranario, a private frog pond. But the frogs still required some effort to spot, blending in against the leaves and soil of their somewhat dilapidated cages. The blue jeans frog (red with blue legs) was no larger than a thumbnail, while the bodies of the glass frogs were completely translucent. But by far the best frog to find behind glass was the “chicken-eating frog” — a bull frog the size of a small cat that is said to eat chicks when given the opportunity. Confronted with that monster frog in the jungle at night, armed with only a flashlight, I may well have turned and run.

Adventure Tourism:

Turrialba

“Will there be cliffs we can jump off of?” Jana Hoffman asked our guide, her native Minnesota accent creeping in. We were in a lull on an 18-mile white-water run down the Pacuare River near the town of Turrialba. Ms. Hoffman and her husband, Dan, on their honeymoon, were on the starboard side of the raft. My father and I held the port, paddles at the ready. Rudolfo Camacho (called Chalo), the guide, a burly, mustached man in his 40s, grinned and nodded to Ms. Hoffman.

But we had rapids to navigate first. The one coming up was Class IV: major obstructions, big, unavoidable waves, distinct risk of flipping — in short, fun.